

# What's the Holdup at Area Rail Crossings?

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By Chris Coffey and Katy  
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## Today

### Swimmer Michael Phelps; actress Jennifer Connelly;...

The sound of a blaring freight train is not what you want to hear if you're in a rush. Yet many drivers in Chicagoland have become accustomed to waiting ten minutes or longer at some of the region's busiest grade crossings.

NBC 5 Investigates has learned Chicago area drivers get delayed at least 7,800 hours every weekday at rail crossings, according to a motorist delay analysis by the Illinois Commerce Commission. The study shows some of the longest waits occur at crossings in LaGrange, Des Plaines, Blue Island and Downers Grove.

"It drives us crazy. It's just ridiculous. You never know when they're going to do it," said Marie Simon when asked about rail crossing delays near her Blue Island home.

Additionally, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) created an interactive map showing grade crossings with reputations for long wait times. Check [here](#) to see if the crossing near you makes the list.

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Trains may also stop altogether at some crossings.

John Jacob said he saw trains repeatedly stopped at 103rd Street in Chicago's Mount Greenwood Neighborhood. He said in addition to inconveniencing drivers, he believes the frequent delays were causing safety concerns.

"Ambulances or fire engines have had to re-route to get to other parts," Jacob said. "There's been issues where police have been stuck on one side trying to get across with their lights on."

Jacob and his neighbor Colette Wagner met with local and state leaders to rally community support. The Surface Transportation Board then filed an injunction which limited where trains could park nearby.

"They can be happy moving with moving their freight through and we certainly don't want to deter that from happening," Wagner said. "But we can also be happy without having these kinds of issues. The safety issues, the health issues, the inconvenience issues."

So what's causing the driver delays? For one thing, Chicago is the busiest rail hub in the entire country. Every day 1300 local commuter trains and freight trains compete for the same track space. However, an agreement called the Chicago Protocol gives passenger trains rights to the tracks during morning and evening rush hours.

Speed limitations and proximity to train yards may be other factors for slow-rolling freight trains.

The six largest railroads in the U.S. and Canada converge in Bedford Park, where The Belt Railway Company is tasked with keeping trains moving on time and preventing back-ups. The massive clearing yard has nearly 300 miles of tracks and switches.

"If the freight railroads don't communicate properly, passenger trains could get stuck because a freight train is

moving on the tracks ahead of it,” said Timothy Coffey of The Belt Railway Company. “That communication is absolutely imperative.”

Coffey said it currently takes about 24 hours for a freight train travelling cross-country to make its way through Chicago. That’s down from a 40 hour wait that was more common several years ago.

Still, one of the most congested rail spots in the country is along the 75th Street Corridor on Chicago’s south side. The crisscross section of tracks is used by both passenger and freight trains.

“You’ve got to be careful where you hold those trains so they don’t block grade crossings, because that affects people going to work in the morning,” said Bill Thompson, chief engineer of CREATE, a public-private partnership formed to improve rail traffic throughout Chicago and its suburbs.

A major fix in the form of a grade separation has already been planned for the 75th Street Corridor. While funding remains a challenge, CREATE has applied for a fast lane grant to start engineering and construction.

More than \$1.4 billion has been committed to CREATE from federal, state, local and private railroad sources. So far, CREATE has spent \$1 billion on 28 projects to improve rail crossings and decrease driver wait times.

“This allows for a more predictable operation, a more consistent operation and a more efficient operation,” Thompson said.

Thompson points to the success of the Englewood Flyover. Two years ago trains using the same tracks at this location would be required to come to a complete stop. Now freight trains can use their own tracks while METRA trains on an overpass can travel at speeds up to 70 miles per hour.

“It eliminates congestion for the commuters, but it also gets America’s freight moving to where it needs to get,” said Association of American Railroads president Ed Hamberger.

The Association of American Railroads is a CREATE member and said whatever happens in Chicago can have a ripple effect on the country’s rail traffic.

“The rest of the country is dependent upon a Chicago network that is fluent and operating efficiently,” said Hamberger.

So far, engineers have completed 28 projects to help speed along Chicago’s trains. A total of 25 projects are still in the design process and many still need funding.

Grade crossing improvement projects are also designed to reduce air pollution from sitting and idling trains.

According to CREATE, existing and planned improvement projects are estimated to pump \$31 billion into the local economy.

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